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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001262

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#) [NO](#) [LTTE](#)
SUBJECT: NORWEGIAN DEPUTY FM DESCRIBES LONG UPHILL ROAD
AHEAD FOR GSL-LTTE TALKS

REF: COLOMBO 1243 AND PREVIOUS

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASONS 1.5
B, D.

1. (C) SUMMARY: Helgesen found President Kumaratunga flexible on peace talks agenda issue, but Karuna situation is preventing progress on getting back to talks. LTTE is seeking a military solution to the Karuna issue. Helgesen sees task as safeguarding the Cease Fire Agreement while Karuna issue plays out. Norwegian involvement seems likely to slow considerably until the Fall. Helgesen was blunt in briefing local press, making clear he thinks peace process is in danger. Helgesen was contemplating whether the Co-Chairs might take some action at this point. A carefully crafted--and blunt--Co-Chairs statement might be useful.
END SUMMARY

2. (U) Ambassador attended lunch briefing given by Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen July 28 at the conclusion of his three-day trip to Sri Lanka. While on the island, Helgesen met with LTTE Political Chief Tamilchelvan, President Kumaratunga, Prime Minister Rajapakse and other assorted players.

3. (C) Following her meeting with Helgesen on July 26, the President issued a statement which said, inter alia, that "the President indicated to Mr. Helgesen that her Government is willing and keen to commence negotiations on an interim authority within the framework of a united State and to reach a durable solution to the conflict. The Government hopes that the LTTE will agree to resume talks on this basis." Some media have been interpreting this statement as a concession by the President to begin talks on the basis demanded by the LTTE that talks deal only with an interim administration for the North and East. Helgesen said that the President is, in fact, being flexible on the agenda issue. However, the two sides are still not close to sitting down, and the main reason is Karuna and the situation in the East. The LTTE is convinced there is an Army link to Karuna and has given up on the government clearing up the situation. Therefore, the LTTE is dealing with the situation in its own way--through military means. Helgesen said that although he has no personal proof that the Army has been aiding Karuna, it appears to him that a proxy war is now being waged in the East. It is a low intensity conflict, but there is a potential for escalation. Whether or not the Army is aiding Karuna, the GSL has an obligation under the Cease Fire Agreement to rein in paramilitary groups. It is not doing so.

4. (C) The scenario, Helgesen said, is for weeks or even months of killings as Karuna and the LTTE fight it out. Would this escalate and lead to outright war? Helgesen said he thought not but it was possible. He noted a "stunning complacency" in the South about the Cease Fire Agreement. The program for the coming months would be "stalemate management" on the political front, while working hard to reinforce the Cease Fire Agreement. He noted that the Cease Fire was actually quite stable in all areas except the East. He would stay in touch with both sides and try to "talk them to their senses."

5. (C) Helgesen said he told the LTTE that the President was being flexible. She has undertaken a number of confidence building measures, including apologizing to the Tamil people for the riots of 1983, canceling provocative anti-LTTE broadcasts on state-run radio, returning land from the High Security Zones to Tamil farmers, etc. He told Tamilchelvan that, by contrast, the LTTE was showing its negative side by its actions, and that the international community was watching. He mentioned the recent killings of eight Karuna followers in Colombo, and Tamilchelvan repeated the LTTE line that this was done by Karuna supporters who wanted to re-defect.

6. (C) Helgesen said that right now it is difficult to see how the donors can bring the parties to the table. He said that at his meeting Tamilchelvan had reiterated the LTTE's commitment to the peace process and to the Oslo declaration and federalism. The LTTE was now preparing to

hold their postponed meeting in Switzerland with legal/constitutional experts from the Tamil diaspora. Ambassador asked if Helgesen thought there was any specific step for the Co-Chairs at this time. Helgesen said he needed to contemplate on that, and that perhaps an even stronger version of the Brussels statement would be useful. Admitting that donor pressure can be asymmetrical in that it puts more pressure on the Government than on the LTTE, he said that it could still be useful in pressuring the other members of the government, specifically the JVP.

17. (C) Helgesen was leaving Colombo on July 29 morning along with Norwegian Ambassador Brattskar. They would travel to London to meet the LTTE's Balasingham. Brattskar would then be on vacation for a month. Helgesen had no specific plan on when he or Eric Solheim might return.

18. (C) Before departing Colombo, Helgesen gave a rare press conference. He was blunt in his analysis of the situation, leading to equally blunt headlines in the July 29 English-language press. The Daily Mirror headlined: "Oslo warns: frozen war starting to melt" and the Island ran it as "Norway admits failure on reviving peace talks." Helgesen made many of the same points he made to donors, and captured his feelings in the metaphor that "The Cease Fire Agreement is not a peace agreement. It only means the war has been frozen. Today, a frozen war is melting at the edges. It is not a good situation." He also noted that he was "disturbed about the incredible complacency," adding that people were in favor of peace but not in favor of the peace process. Helgesen concluded that he would consult the international community on the next step to be taken given the stalemate and the security situation.

19. (C) COMMENT: Helgesen was about as gloomy as we have ever seen him, but certainly did not act as if the situation was hopeless. His position now seems to be that, in the absence of some positive action by the government, the Tamils will have to sort out the Karuna issue themselves--which means a period of internecine warfare. After that he could get back to work on bringing the two sides to the table, if the inter-Tamil violence does not escalate into greater violence. With Ambassador Brattskar absent for all of August, we think Norwegian efforts will diminish considerably for a time.

10. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Helgesen's analysis seems generally on track to us. The Karuna situation, which was totally unexpected, presented the government with a variety of unpleasant options. Whether by design or chance, the government has now drifted into a position where it has gained almost nothing. If it is supporting Karuna--which is probably the case--it is annoying the LTTE without gaining any lasting advantage, and at the same time has seriously soured the atmosphere for renewed talks. Options for improving this situation are limited. The Co-Chairs could certainly consider issuing a statement warning once again, as they did in Brussels, that the attention span of the international community is limited. Such a statement would need to be carefully calibrated. It would have to tell the LTTE that its behavior in the Karuna affair is unacceptable. It would have to tell the Government that it has a positive responsibility to see that the Karuna affair does not jeopardize the peace process, i.e., that it must take some action and not just allow the situation to drift. It should also stress that the Government must ensure that all its members speak with one voice.

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